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Dynamics of Faith: Imam Musa in the Revival of Islamic Teaching in Cambodia

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Abstract

Born a Cambodian Cham, Ly Mousa who later became Imam Musa, left home at a tender age of twelve to go to Bangkok, and Patani, in Siam and then to Kelantan, in Malaya, to pursue his religious education. After returning home right after the Second World War, he married a young girl from an influential family, and became an instant well-known religious activist not only in Cambodia but the whole of French Indochina. A different Islamic teaching, not only in approach but also in content, was taught, initially, in the village of his wife, to men and women, young and old. His teachings, after some time led to the breaking up of the Muslim Cham community into *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda*. By 1970, when the Cambodian civil war started, his followers had spread from Kratie to Phnom Penh, on the eastern bank of Mekong River. The dynamism of Imam Musa and his followers, known as *Kaum Muda*, created the *Sangkum Ly Mousa*, even before the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* was born. During some twenty years of his brave and active teaching, national primary schools were built by the *Sangkum Ly Mousa* in the heart of Cham villages where Cham children could easily have access to formal education; through some organized economic activities, his follower's livelihood have known some changes. This paper also briefly discloses the present situations of the Cham in Indochina. It discusses the ups and downs of the life of Imam Musa, how Imam Musa implanted the dynamism to the *Kaum Muda* Cham community and how their ethnic identity was respected in the Buddhist Cambodian majority community, until his tragic death in 1975, just after the Khmer Rouge take over.

Introduction

The Muslims in Cambodia are composed mainly of the Cham, Malays and a very small number of Arabs, Pakistanis and *Kabul*, the Afghans, as they are known locally. At present no one knows exactly how many of them exist, but the number ranges from some 500,000 to 1.5 million. They live all over the country in rather small communities or big ones. They mainly live in the eastern part of Cambodia; but since the 1980's, they have opened up small hamlets, which can be found all over Cambodia. Generally, they are known as Cham (one of the ethnics of the old kingdom of Champa), Khmer Islam, Cham-Chvea or simply Chvea (referring to Jawa but meaning the Malays) to the locals. Beside those living in Cambodia, the Cham-Malay are also found in Vietnam and Laos. Since the fall of Indochina to the communist regimes, they have found shelters in Malaysia and remote countries such as the USA, Canada, and Europe, and in Japan as well as in Australia.

Until this present day, no one knows exactly when the Cham became Muslims. However, it was known that Islam had arrived in Champa as early as the 9th century. Though from the 14th century, Islam was part of the beliefs and religions of the Champa people.

Since then the Muslim Cham and the Malays from the Malay Peninsula, especially Kelantan and Pattani, established a very good religious relationship¹. This good relationship led to the coming of a young Champa prince, whom later became king Po Rome (1627-1651), to Kelantan to learn Islamic teachings. The coming of– young Chams to Kelantan to learn Islamic teachings continues until this present day. And one of them was Ly Mousa, who later was known as Imam Musa.

Imam Musa

Imam Musa was born Ly Mousa or Musa Bin Ali, in the year of the Snake, or 1916 in the Christian era. He was born in Phum (the village of) Ampil, Khum (sub-district of) Pœuh, Srok (district of) Krauch Chmar, Khet (province of) Kompong Cham, Cambodia to a farmers family. He was the eldest of seven siblings of three boys and four girls.

At a very young age he understood the living conditions of his family and the others in his village, almost all of them were farmers. He vowed to bring his family out of poverty. Then he left Ampil at a tender age of twelve and headed to the town of Poi Pet, near the Cambodia-Thailand border. At Poi Pet, he helped town traders in their businesses.

After only six or seven months later, he was spotted by a Thai businessman, by the name of Hj Ismail, from Bangkok. Hj Ismail brought the young Musa to his house, adopted him as his child and sent him to a Thai school. We are not sure how long he went to a Thai school but we know that he spoke, wrote and read Thai fluently. His adopted father passed away in 1987².

From Bangkok he proceeded to Patani to learn Islamic studies. As he did not get enough financial support, he started a small business. When the Second World War started he had already travelled quite often to Kota Bharu, Kelantan. He usually brought along with him construction materials such as nails, zinc and cement for sale. (Aziz Chik...); On the other hand, other Cham students chose to beg for *zakat* (tithe) or any other forms of donation from Muslims.

Usually he would stay for long periods in Kota Bharu, where he attended the Nik Salleh pondok, in Kampung China. It was here that he met with Yusof bin Osman, Noh bin Osman and Muhammad Zain (three uncles of the writer whom he addresses as Walong Soh, Wangah Noh and Wawan Zain respectively) whom came here much earlier than Ly Mousa. In Kota Bharu too he met another village mate of his, Son Ahmad who studied in a different *pondok*, in Melor. Later Son Ahmad became known as Imam Ahmad India, as he pursued his studies for a Masters degree in India. Son Ahmad returned home in 1956.

At the age of 29 years old, right at the end of the Second World War, Ly Mousa returned home to the elation of his family members.³ It is to be noted that by the time the young Mousa was studying there, the *Islah* movement was very active, not only in the Malay Peninsula but also in the whole Malay Archipelago.⁴ In the Malay Peninsula, as a result of many young Malays who upon returning home from studying in the Middle East, set a new development in their mode of thinking. Basically, the *Islah* movement is a movement

¹ See Mohamad Zain Bin Musa 1994.

² Pada tahun 1987, Khusyatillah telah pergi ke Bangkok dan dapat mencari rumah Hj Ismail. Beliau telah meninggal, dan isterinya pada ketika itu, masih ada. Rumah Hj Ismail ada dalam 45 minit perjalanan kereta dari Bangkok. Nama kampungnya adalah Arun Amarin.

³ Imam Musa's life in Patani and Kelantan is not studied here. It is a subject of another research at this point of time.

⁴ Joroen Peeters 1997.

set up to restore the true teachings of Islam based on the Quran and *Hadith*. And those who spread this teaching were called *Kaum Muda*.

The birth of *Kaum Muda* threatened the religious leadership of the old folks and some of the Malay Lords, who were practicing the Islamic teachings mixed with other beliefs such as ancestral customs which include animism. The *Kaum Muda* believed that due to this practice of the Islamic unorthodoxy, the Muslim communities were underdeveloped. Among the fore runners of the *Kaum Muda* were famous personalities such as Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Muhammad Yunus.

As time passed by, many newspapers were published, the first one was *al-Imam*, a Malay newspaper published in Singapore in 1906. This paper appealed to the Muslim community to follow the true path of Islamic teachings based on the Qur'an and *Hadith*. They urged the Muslim community to accept knowledge of the West which is considered beneficial. They also urged the community to allow women to have freedom in education and be active in community life. Besides *al-Imam*, other newspapers such as *Neracha*, *Utusan Melayu* and *Lembaga Melayu* were also published in Singapore. The *Kaum Muda* also published a magazine *al-Ikhwān* in 1925 in Pulau Penang under the leadership of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi.

The *Kaum Muda* struggles were not going on smoothly. Those who espoused the *Kaum Muda* idea were strongly opposed by a group called *Kaum Tua*. To respond to the many articles published by the *Kaum Muda*, the *Kaum Tua* also had their own voices heard through *Lidah Benar*, which was published in Klang. And to allow women to further their education, the first building was built and completed in 1936 to accommodate female students. This building was part of the Maahad II Ihya Assyarif, built by Ustaz Abu Bakar al-Bakir in Gunung Semanggol, Perak in 1934.

As it has been mentioned earlier, due to the lack of documentation on the activities and with whom the young and energetic Imam Musa associated with, we shall continue discussing the life and times of Imam Musa in his beloved homeland of Kompong Cham. What had been preached and practiced by Imam Musa is similar to the approach and practice by the *Kaum Muda*.



Imam Musa Bin Ali (1916 – 1975)⁵



Zainab Binti Mustafa (1929 -)

At the age of 31 years old, Imam Musa married Miss Fa Nab or Zainab Binti Mustafa. Fa Nab is from Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kom-

⁵ The three photographs published here are by Courtesy of Khusyatillah Bt Musa.

pong Cham. Prek Krut is a village about five kilometers away from Phum Pœuh, the famous Imam Musa's natal village. Fa Nab was from an influential family. The marriage resulted in nine children, six boys and three girls. Now, Fa Nab lives in the USA with two of her children, Kyusyattillah and Khidir. The other two living children, Khifatullah and Ihsan are in Cambodia.

Islamic Teachings

Upon arrival in his village, Ampil, Imam Musa's distinctness was in his dressing. Usually, a religious man, such as an *imam*, a *khatib* or religious teachers in the whole of Indochina, at that time, had their head shaved and wore a turban and *av Jva* (*baju Melayu*, a Malay long sleeved shirt) as village folks wore sarong, *av jva* with either a *kopiah* (white cap) or black *songkok*.

The village folks who initially welcomed him tried to turn away from him as in their opinion his outlook did not show a learned religious person. He wore trousers, sometimes even shorts, shirts, kept his hair and grew a beard. They despised him to a point that when he felt unsafe, he kept a dog under his house, for his own protection. This again fueled their hatred for him even more so as a dog to them is the dirtiest (*najis mughallazah*) of all animals.

The breaking point of the relationship between him and the villagers was in their daily prayers. Two traditional practices in a prayer by the old folks were the wiping of their faces or foreheads after the 12th *rukun* that is after the *Salam* and the reading of the *qunut* as part of the *subuh* prayer. Both of these practices were not parts of Imam Musa's prayer, though he sometimes read the *qunut* when and only it was needed.

In addition to this, Imam Musa started teaching the translation and interpretation of the holy Quran to his wife's village folks, men and women, old and young. These classes were conducted almost every evening between *Maghrib* and the *Isha* prayers. The *hadith* were also taught in these classes. In the meantime, he trained those who wanted to pursue their studies. The number of his students grew as time passed. Only when he felt they were qualified, were they allowed to teach the translation and interpretation of the Quran. And through his diligence, up to 1970 when the Cambodian civil war started, he managed to train a handful of them. Some of them obtained scholarships to pursue their religious education abroad.

His *new* method of teaching and interpretation of the Quran, which prior to this was thought to be only the domain of special people, was well accepted by many people, from normal village folks to the educated and socially high-ranking personalities. To the normal folks, some of the topics Imam Musa had introduced were unheard of before or contradictory to the five tenets of Islam. Imam Musa even taught lessons on economics and politics. I remember him vividly teaching to the village heads who were known as *hakim* and *imam*, who felt that their position in the society was threatened.

Following this, the Muslim community was split into two groups known as *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda*. Imam Musa was at the head of the *Kaum Muda*. Because of the existence of both of these groups, the members of the community were literally broken up: some husbands and wives were separated; some members of the same family did not speak to one another. Imam Musa and his followers were accused of practicing deviant Islamic teachings and *kufur*. All these could happen because everyone wanted to go to heaven after their death, thus they must practice what they know to be right.

Despite all this, religious schools were slowly set up by Imam Musa in villages where there were enough numbers of his followers. These schools consisted of a few tables and long wooden benches set up under some houses, especially the imam's. In some villages

which they had access to, classes were conducted in the *surau* or *masjid*. Besides those so-called *pondok*, the first religious school was built in Phum Khbop, Khum Svay Khleang in 1968. The building of this school could not be completed as the Cambodian civil war, or the spill over of the second Vietnam War, started in 1970.

Some of the *pondok* teachers were those who were teachers before; but some others were given the task by Imam Musa after having attained a certain level of education from him. As for the religious books, they were brought from Malaysia, Penang or Kelantan. And as there were not enough copies, the lessons were hand copied and distributed to various villages.

Imam Musa's teachings not only spread within the confines of Srok Krauch Chmar but also reverberated along the Mekong River, in the eastern part of Cambodia and in the whole of Indochina, especially in the regions of Saigon and Chaudoc. As the crisis between the two groups, *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda* grew, they decided to hold a major debate in 1955. Imam Musa headed the *Kaum Muda*, and the *Kaum Tua* was headed by Tuan Hj Ali from Moat Chrouk (Vietnam) assisted by a few other Tuans. This debate was seen more as a competition between those whose sources of knowledge depended on secondary sources (*Kaum Tua*) against those who relied on the holy Quran and *hadith* (*Kaum Muda*).

The breaking up of families actually happened after this debate where the secondary sources could not withstand the primary sources of Islamic teaching. And the effects of this debate also brought about a series of accusations against Imam Musa, some cases were police cases aimed at discrediting Imam Musa and a major accusation was one done to eliminate him permanently from the religious scene in Cambodia. This case was aimed at both Imam Musa and Imam Ahmad India. They were both expatriated but some months later managed to find their way home and lived until their painful death at the brutal hands of the Khmer Rouge in 1975. He suffered all his life due to his intention to bring about the change and introduce dynamism in the teachings of Islam to a community which did not seem to progress according to the teachings of Islam; besides some Muslim communities seemed to vegetate all year round.

National Education

The education of the Muslim communities in Cambodia under the leadership of Imam Musa was beyond just religious education alone. He was now convinced, of his ideas which he had before he left his home in Phum Ampil, some forty years ago, that education could potentially bring about mobility to his community. However, this education has to include national or modern education. Where modern and religious education is given to both sexes.

Imam Musa and his closest followers who included Maklong Sah (Aishah binti Wan Mohamad), Cei Phin @ Po Phin, Hj Sos (Hakim Yusoff), Vadeur Sa and Vangah Kechik from Phum Prek Krout and Pet Sa (Math Mousa or Musa Bin Ahmad), also from Prek Krout but worked in Phnom Penh, held a series of discussions on how to improve the living standard of the Muslim communities. But first they needed to form a well organised community which they named *Sangkum Ly Mousa* (I would translate it as *Ly Mousa Solidarity*) in 1953. This organisation of *Sangkum Ly Mousa* was created ahead of the formation of a national political movement known as *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* by Norodom Sihanouk in 1955, «usually translated as People's Socialist Community»⁶.

⁶ D. P. Chandler 1996, *A History of Cambodia*, p. 188.

The *Sangkum Ly Mousa* built in 1955 the first primary school for the national education system, which is secular in nature, in the middle of Phum Prek Krout, where majority of its population are Muslims. The wooden school building, a block of three class-rooms was built with brute energy of the Muslim community, starting from cutting wood in the forest to make it into planks; sand and pebbles collected in the Mekong river, just opposite their houses, and of course donations from well-to-do individuals. The second block of another three class-rooms was built later. The Krauch Chmar district education officer, Mr. Uom Kek, who later became a well-loved headmaster and teacher of the *Sangkum Ly Mousa Primary School*, approved the application for the school. He was one of my beloved teachers.

The first *Sangkum Ly Mousa Primary School* teachers were Cham picked by Imam Musa himself. Only after a short time later, qualified teachers were sent to the school by the government, all of them native of the district of Krauch Chmar. Their salaries were paid by the government; and the school was administered under the education system of Cambodia. Following that success, a few more primary schools were built by the *Sangkum Ly Mousa*, one each in the Khum Kompong Ro, Prek Sandai (Chœutéal Phloueh in Khmer) in Srok Chhlong, Khet Kratie. Many young Cham children were sent to the school without any more fear by the parents as it was believed before that sending Cham children (meaning Muslim) to national schools, the children would become Khmer (meaning not Muslim of *Kufar*). In the 1970s many had reached the university level and left the country for further education overseas.

Economy

As an individual, Imam Musa was a fisherman, like many others living along the Mekong river. He used drifting nets as a means to catch fish. He also had a medium size motor boat which he hired for transporting goods. He did not own any piece of farm land like his father did.

For the community, his economic plan was about to become reality by the year 1970. But it was too late and just a dream for him and many others. By early 1960's, the *Sangkum Ly Mousa*, built up a fund, *Baitulmal* (treasury), where a family member of the Sangkum contribute 800 Riels (around 20USD) per year. Those who could not afford the sum would go and collect sand or pebbles from the Mekong river to sell. By 1963 two points of sale had been established, one in Prêk Bak (srok Krauch Chmar) and the other one was at Chruoy Cham (in Chœutéal Phloueh).

By late 1960's, the *Sangkum Ly Mousa* started to buy paddy fields in the village of Makh, Srê Véal in the district of Prêk Kâk village not far away from Svay Kléang and on the opposite side of the Mekong River. In the late 1960s, the paddy fields could produce enough for the yearly need of some 10 teachers. The quantity of the paddy produced was about 200 thang⁷ per year. The teachers whom benefited from the program were those in Khum Svay Khleang (in the province of Kompong Cham), Phum Thmei and Kompong Ro (both in the province of Kratie).

The money to buy those paddy fields came from contributions of his followers and donations by sympathisers. To the question of why he started the economic reform very much later? The answer is very simple. First the community was generally poor. And secondly he believed that if the people did not have the conviction, and did not understand the importance of collective work, it was futile to explain the idea to them. And this took many years of his

⁷ 1 thang = 15kg of rice.

precious leadership life. And to carry out the economic reform it had to start from things that the participants (villagers) understood; as we knew that the people of the districts were individual farmers or fishermen and never worked collectively before. And the process had to go through education first, as what was being done. And by education it meant that it had to combine religious education to the modern education which included mathematics, sciences, history, geography etc... That was the reason why the first national primary schools were built at the heart of the Muslim community villages of his followers so that the young found it easy to go to school and parents too felt secure in sending their children there.

Legacy of Imam Musa in Indochina

As mentioned earlier, the Muslims in Indochina were mainly descendants of the kingdom of Champa. Due to so many reasons, mainly the long process of the *nam-tien*, the displaced Cham had founded their villages in the kingdom of Cambodia, including Tay Ninh

and Chaudoc, formerly known as Rong Damrei and Moat Chrouk, in Khmer⁸. They are also found in Vientiane, Laos.

After 1993, in Cambodia, the Muslims started to build new villages in almost every part of Cambodia in search of better living. The migration from their home villages to other parts of Cambodia was mainly due to economic reasons. When it was hard to earn a living in their villages, the people started moving out in search for a better livelihood elsewhere. This movement of the Cham Muslim communities within Cambodia could easily be done as they were considered as part and parcel of the whole Cambodian community. On the contrary, in Vietnam, since 1975 life does not seem to be that easy.

In Vietnam after 1975, new land reforms were introduced. The effects are more predominant in the highlands where other Champa ethnic communities, such as the Rade, Cru and the Jerai, live. This culminated in the 2003-04 event where many met with death and some survived to tell their stories⁹. The Muslim Cham live in the regions of Ho

The Malay-Cham Settlements in Indochina



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⁸ See Mohamad Zain Bin Musa 1990 and Mak Phœun 2003.

⁹ See www.aitpn.org, www.persecuton.org.

Chi Minh City, An Giang and Tayninh and the regions known as their ancestor's lands. In Laos, the Muslim community is rather small. Their concentration is in Vientiane.

In Cambodia, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, every Cambodian, including the Cham people, started to find their way back to their villages. Upon reaching their villages they started to rebuild their lives together by picking up bits and pieces left off after the Khmer Rouge regime. Besides rebuilding their own family, they concentrated on renovating, and later in some villages, building new mosques or *musallah*, where which they immediately looked for someone who could barely read the Qur'an to teach their young. Donations poured in. Islam is important to them as it is believed and history has taught them so, that the identity of the community survives because of Islam, which differentiate them from the majority of the population who are mainly Buddhist. Islam is the core of their unity and identity. For the Muslims in Indochina, everything evolves around the teachings and their practice of Islam. They have started once again from Zero¹⁰. Copies of the Qu'ran were needed¹¹.

Even though *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua* could not be identified in Indochina, especially in Cambodia, Imam Musa's students and followers who survived the Pol Pot regime, still practiced the dynamics of faith propagated by Imam Musa's *Kaum Muda*. Children, whenever and wherever possible, were immediately sent to schools. And a new breed of young graduates from the Middle East, once again, brought in the new dynamism in the interpretation and application of the Islamic faith, a trend which has seen the refusal of some parents to send their children to some Islamic schools.¹²

Conclusion

Imam Musa was a man of vision. With all his sincerity, he sacrificed his entire life working for Islamic causes by first improving their education, religious and modern education. He brought many changes to the Muslim society in Cambodia, in terms of the understanding of Islam, the teachings and the practices of Islam, and most importantly the application of the Islamic faith. The teaching of Islam is not about rituals and blind belief but it teaches us to understand as we all know that there were so many verses in the holy Qu'ran, which put forward things, ideas, concepts of living in the form of questions. This world is the bridge to the future. And as an individual, in the words of his own daughter, Khusyatillah, and I personally believe so as well, he was a caring person.



Imam Musa and his family (early 1970s)

¹⁰ See François Ponchaud 1977.

¹¹ See Mohamad Zain Bin Musa and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abd. Rahman 2003, chapter 7: The cham in Cambodia after the Pol Pot regime.

¹² See chapter 8 of Mohamad Zain Bin Musa and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abd. Rahman 2006.

This caringness has brought about unity and solidarity within the community. As a father and an Imam, he was very honest and truthful. He strongly believed in himself. He was a role model for so many younger generations who wanted to emulate him. The faith he taught us has brought the dynamism into the whole society. He was the envy of many of his contemporaries.

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Interviews:

A. Aziz Bin Chik

Imam Musa's student

Born in 1944 (63 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.

Former Cambodian Army Officer in the Lon Nol regime.

Now living in Muar, Malaysia.

Fa Nab (Zainab Binti Mustafa)

Imam Musa's wife.

Born in 1929 (78 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.

Now living with her daughter in the USA.

Khusyatillah Binti Musa

Imam Musa's daughter.

Born in 1959 (48 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.

Now living in the USA.

Ly Imweur

Born in 1953 (54 yrs old), in Phum Ambil, Khum Pœuh, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham.

Imam Musa's student.

Survived the Khmer Rouge regime.

Now, Entrepreneur, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Nasrullah Bin Ahmad

Son of Imam Ahmad India

Born in 1973 (36 yrs old)

Keep very close contact with the family if Ust Azhari, a pondok mate of his father

B.A. (usulluddin) from Al-Azhar university, Egypt (2000)

Now living in Cambodia

Hj Nik Sulaiman Hj Wan Nor

A follower and student of Imam Musa

Born in 1947 (60 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.

Now living in Nibong Tebal, Pulau Penang, Malaysia.

Hjh Rafeah Hj Osman

A follower of Imam Musa and a contemporary of FA Nab

Born in 1933 (74 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.
Now living in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia.

Zakaryya Adam

Born in 1950, in Phum Khpob, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham.
Imam Musa's student.
Presently a politician, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.